

# INSIDE CONGRESS

## News and Views from U.S. Rep. Nick Smith

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### ENHANCING EDUCATION

In my daily life, I'm surrounded by educators. My wife is a former substitute teacher and my oldest daughter and daughter-in-law are both currently teaching. In addition, I've met with teachers throughout the 7th Congressional District, from Lansing to Litchfield. Everyone seems to agree on the same important points: teaching is a demanding profession; parents need to become more involved; government regulations, especially federal ones, can be counterproductive; and kids are basically good.

I believe that people become teachers because they want to positively influence the minds of tomorrow. However, we are asking more and more of our teachers than ever before, causing them to walk a tightrope of heavy responsibilities. Most teachers are a caring lot and are willing to undertake and accept the enormous task in preparing today's kids to become tomorrow's business and community leaders, doctors, engineers, or parents and teachers themselves, but like a high school English teacher recently told me, the job description has varied. She said it is frustrating for teachers to be expected to not only educate their students, but to feed, entertain, instill morals and do everything but fill out the college application for them. Fortunately, most parents in my district do make sure their kids have homes, clothes and meals and seem to care that their kids know right from wrong. Many parents also are interested in improving their children's schooling and learning environment. Statistics from the state Department of Education show that nearly 80 percent of school districts include parents in some curriculum development and review.

Additionally, most teachers are concerned about the overreaching arm of the federal government interfering with day-to-day classroom activities. As a Pennfield High School government teacher told me: "The federal government only supplies about 5 percent of schools' operating funds, yet does its best to control 40 percent of

what happens in the classroom." Teachers, parents and local school board members are quite capable of directing their children's education.

Teachers have also helped point out another thing: our kids are solid kids. We all need to have more faith in the youth of today. Despite some "bad apples," the majority of students are striving to do their best. Though the magnitude of the problem is often overstated, it's important to remember that the vast majority of Michigan students never present a discipline problem. In fact, less than one-tenth of 1 percent of Michigan students were expelled in 1995-96. And more students are finishing high school now than at any time in the past six years. While the current drop-out rate of 5.2 percent marks a continuing decline, we must still work to keep more kids in school.

One of my colleagues in Congress, Pete Hoekstra, is working on a creative initiative called "Education at a Crossroads." This project is about examining the federal government's role in education to see how it can be improved to enhance student learning. With a focus on basic academics, parental involvement and sending dollars to the classroom, members of Congress will solicit teachers, parents and school leaders for ideas on what works and what is wasted.

I think this is an important step in properly re-evaluating the federal government's funding of education programs. By soliciting ideas and thoughts from the people who know it best, we can improve and enhance our current educational systems.

These summer months are a good time to reflect on how we can all work together to help make our school systems better and ensure that our kids and grandkids receive the education they need to have productive futures.

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## **TAX MONEY IN SPACE**

Congress will soon debate space program funding. Since the Mars Pathfinder spacecraft touched down on the Fourth of July, many Americans have been fascinated by the mission and the extraterrestrial landscapes seen on TV. News reports abound about Martian rocks with names like “Barnacle Bill” and “Yogi.” We’ve watched Sojourner — the rover carried in Pathfinder — travel across the planet’s surface.

While Americans should be proud of this success, this mission provides a opportunity to analyze our space program achievements. In the last few years, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has systematically shifted resources to manned space flights and away from mechanical missions like Pathfinder. The manned missions are more exciting and gain public support for NASA funding, but much more expensive and less enlightening. As a result, we have been paying more and more for less and less space science information.

A cost comparison indicates the relative value of unmanned probes such as Pathfinder, which is estimated to cost \$226 million over its lifespan. That’s certainly plenty of money, but it pales in comparison to the estimated \$1.5 billion NASA spends on each Space Shuttle mission and the \$94 billion it proposes to spend on the International Space Station (plus many billions more

to operate it once it is built). The high cost of these projects is even less defensible in light of their meager scientific yields. The last Space Shuttle mission produced less new information than Pathfinder, but cost taxpayers five to six times as much.

It is for these reasons that I have consistently pushed for more unmanned flights and voted against building the International Space Station. We know a great deal about space in low earth orbit that the envisioned Space Station will occupy since we’ve been exploring this area since the early 1960s with the Mercury missions, the Space Shuttle, and the Skylab and Mir space stations. It seems unreasonable to spend so much money when budgets are extremely tight in pursuing a project with so little potential for significant gain. Many scientists claim that the research money could be better spent on the ground or in unmanned flights. Unfortunately, the enormous cost of the Space Station project is leading NASA to cancel many cheaper and more cost-effective research and missions like Pathfinder.

It is time for us to take a hard look at our space programs. NASA and Congress should focus on Pathfinder’s success and give up on less cost-effective projects, ensuring a brighter future for both space exploration and the taxpayers.

## **THE NEW AIR STANDARDS**

Last November, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed new air quality regulations that have an enormous impact on Michigan. The new standards increasing ozone and airborne particulate level regulation are backed by dubious scientific information and carry enormous costs for businesses and taxpayers. I’ve testified to the House Agriculture Committee, held meetings in the 7th Congressional District, and written to EPA Administrator Carol Browner. In addition, I’ve joined Rep. Fred Upton (R-6th), Rep. John Dingell (D-16th), Governor John Engler and other Michigan leaders to block the implementation of these regulations.

The proposed standards will be difficult and perhaps impossible to meet in many areas. For example, the ozone standard changes from 0.12 to 0.08 parts per million, meaning there will be less than one ozone

molecule in every 10 million air molecules. The EPA proposal for particulate matter size (essentially soot ) poses additional problems as levels for particles are set down to 2.5 microns. In comparison, the width of a human hair is 70 microns — 28 times as wide. Because these small particulates can stay airborne for days and weeks, pollution from South Bend, Chicago and other areas could force Calhoun, Jackson, Lenawee and other counties into noncompliance.

Everyone wants cleaner air. However, no scientific foundation exists for these extreme regulations. In fact, very little is known about the health effects, if any, of such low levels of ozone and particulates. Initially, the EPA claimed the new standards would save 20,000 lives a year, later revising the figure to 15,000. However, the agency refused to re-

lease the data on which those estimates are based. Independent researchers say they can't substantiate the EPA's health claims on currently available data.

The costs are easier to establish. These standards will radically alter the way we live as the EPA estimates that about half of the U.S. population will experience the new restrictive regulations limiting automobile use, power generation, lawn mowers, wood-burning stoves, fireplaces and even barbecue grills. These regulations will suppress economic growth and job creation in Southern Michigan and other areas found in nonattainment. The President's own Council of Economic Advisors has estimated the new regulations will cost between \$11.6 and \$60 billion per year, compared to benefits of \$200 million to \$1 billion per year. The EPA's calculations

(which only estimate partial costs) show the regulation costs outweigh their benefits.

In my letter to the EPA, I urged a delay on implementing the regulations until research at several universities is completed. Air quality is improving nationwide without the regulations. All six air pollutants tracked by the EPA have shown dramatic decreases since 1975. Air particulates are down 24%, sulfur dioxide down 50%, carbon monoxide down 53%, ozone down 25%, nitrogen dioxide down 24%, and lead down 94%. Administrator Browner recently testified before the House Commerce Committee that air quality will continue to improve substantially even without the new regulations. The regulations should be defeated, or at least delayed, until more of our questions can be answered.

## **THE CASE FOR CAPITAL PUNISHMENT**

*The following is a shortened version of a letter to Governor Engler and state legislators*

Dear Governor Engler:

As a former member of the state Legislature, I am writing to urge your support for efforts to allow voters to decide whether to allow capital punishment in the state of Michigan. Judges and juries should have the option of punishing some heinous murders with the death penalty.

If approved, the imposition of the death penalty would not be automatic in any case. After the conviction of a criminal for a crime potentially punishable by death, a separate jury proceeding would help determine the sentence. The jury would weigh the various aggravating and mitigating factors to decide whether the death penalty should be imposed. If the jury recommends a death sentence, the judge would still be able to change that to life in prison. This process, which is required by a series of Supreme Court decisions, ensures that the death penalty is imposed in only the most horrific cases.

To date, 38 states and the federal government have legalized this maximum penalty for particularly violent crimes. In addition, public opinion surveys show overwhelming bipartisan support for the death penalty in Michigan. You no doubt recall that as a State Senator, I introduced a bill with the support of law enforcement agencies to put this question on the ballot. I believed then and still contend that the Legislature has an obligation to let voters decide this issue.

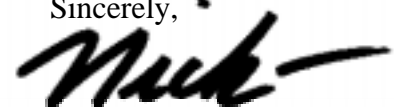
We need look no farther than recent headlines to justify a renewed advocacy of capital punishment in Michigan. Recently, the child molester who raped and

strangled 7 year old Megan Kanka in New Jersey—spurring “Megan’s Law”—was sentenced to death with overwhelming public support. Timothy McVeigh’s Oklahoma City bombing also was punished by a jury that decided to impose a death sentence. But what if similar acts of brutality occurred in Michigan, outside the jurisdiction of the federal government? Regardless of how ruthless and despicable the crime, the most severe punishment a Michigan jury could impose is life in prison.

One needs only to look to Texas for evidence that capital punishment, when administered promptly and often, can effectively deter crime. While most states with a death penalty rarely use it, Texas has been at the forefront in carrying out executions. Whereas California has executed just two of its death row inmates since 1976, Texas has executed 122. As a result, Texas’ murder rate has dropped dramatically, even as the national murder rate has remained relatively unchanged. This shows that where the death penalty is vigorously enforced, it can make a difference in deterring crime.

I believe we should establish a death penalty in Michigan because some crimes against humanity are so serious that life imprisonment simply is an insufficient penalty.

Sincerely,



Nick Smith

Member of Congress

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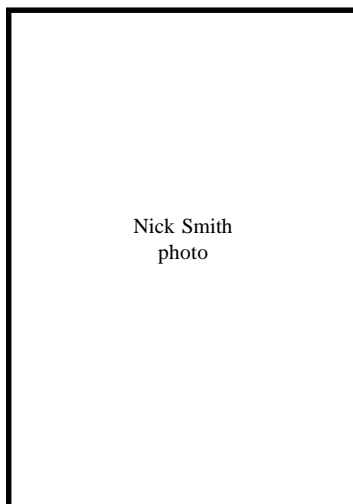
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*Detach and return completed form to: Congressman Nick Smith, 121 S. Cochran Avenue, Charlotte, MI 48813.*

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## About Congressman Nick Smith:



Nick Smith is the U.S. Representative from Michigan's 7th Congressional District, which includes the counties of Branch, Calhoun, Eaton, Hillsdale, Jackson and Lenawee, as well as portions of Barry and Washtenaw counties.

Smith, a former president pro tempore of the state Senate and a state representative, is a successful farmer and businessman who first became a member of Congress in 1992. He serves on the Budget and Agriculture committees, and chairs the Budget Committee's Working Group on Physical Capital.

Most recently, Nick Smith has been a key player in the balanced budget accord agreed to with the President, having his bill that requires the federal government to put caps on discretionary spending included in the accord. In addition, three of his bills on capital gains taxes, death taxes and the alternative minimum tax were incorporated into the tax-cut package of 1997.

He and his wife, Bonnie, have four children and seven grandchildren.

## About *Inside Congress*:

*Inside Congress* is a compilation of commentaries written by Congressman Nick Smith and is sent to community leaders. It provides information about current happenings in Congress and intends to give readers a "behind-the-scenes" insight.

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